

# Pressuring the Politburo: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and State Socialist Feminism

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National women's organizations were a ubiquitous feature of all of the east European state socialist countries during the twentieth century. Although the character of these organizations varied from country to country, they were all state-run mass organizations headed by political appointees who were variously charged with mobilizing domestic women and representing their nations at international forums concerning women's rights. Together with the national youth organizations and the national pensioners associations, mass women's organizations were theoretically open to all members of society, whether they were official members of the Communist Party or not.

In the west these mass women's organizations were treated with suspicion. Their advocacy efforts were downplayed or discredited because of their leaders' political commitments to various forms of Marxism-Leninism. In studies of women's activism during the Cold War, feminist scholars tended to uncritically view these organizations as only capable of taking direction from the top, with the sociologist Maxine Molyneux stating in 1981 that "all [communist] political institutions are designed primarily to execute party policy and to mobilize their particular constituencies for the fulfillment of state goals."<sup>1</sup> Even in research produced after 1990, east European mass women's organizations continue to be discredited or ignored, with the historian Francisca de Haan arguing that feminist scholarship is still heavily influenced by lingering Cold War biases against communist women.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, however, feminist scholars have begun to question the assumptions underlying the idea that state socialist women's organizations were merely appendages of male-controlled communist parties and that their role was merely to mobilize women's support for party goals. This article contributes to the emerging body of scholarship on state socialist women's organiza-

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1. Maxine Molyneux, "Socialist Societies Old and New: Progress toward Women's Emancipation?," *Feminist Review*, no. 8 (Summer 1981): 28.

2. Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in the Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010): 548.

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tions by examining the case of the *Komitet na dvizhenieto na bŭlgarskite zheni* (Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement, CBWM). This article demonstrates that the CBWM was successful at representing Bulgarian women's interests, despite the structural limitations within which they were working. The leaders of the CBWM were able to extract resources from recalcitrant politicians for whom women's issues were, at best, secondary concerns. This case study challenges the persistent stereotypes about communist women's organizations and explores the politically constrained definition of critical concepts such as *self-actualization* and *state feminism*.

### State Feminism under State Socialism

One of the key recommendations of the first United Nations Conference on Women, held in Mexico City in 1975, was that individual countries should create national machineries to help promote women's rights. These new state-based organizations, agencies, and gender desks spawned a class of professional feminists, sometimes called "femocrats," who worked within state bureaucracies (as state employees) to advocate for women's equality. This phenomenon of state-based advocacy for women's rights is analytically referred to as state feminism.<sup>3</sup>

According to Amy Mazur and Dorothy McBride, the term entered academic and policy-making parlance in the 1980s, originating out of the experience of women working successfully within Scandinavian national contexts.<sup>4</sup> When applied to western democracies, the term was primarily descriptive; it merely named a particular arrangement whereby feminist movements were successfully integrating themselves into the established corridors of power. But West German sociologists also deployed the phrase to deride women's organizing in the eastern bloc. The West Germans "criticized established women's agencies and party-sponsored groups as a way of controlling women and co-opting women's movements, rather than encouraging an autonomous approach to women's rights."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, while state feminist projects might be efficacious in the west, from the outset they were considered detrimental to women's organizing in the east. In 1978 the political scientist Barbara Wolfe Jancar wrote, "The inability of women in Communist societies to organize independently clearly hampers female political participation. The national women's committees cannot be said to represent women."<sup>6</sup> Jancar's book *Women under Communism* and a dissertation by the political scientist Sharon Wolchik were the first studies

3. See, for instance, Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires, "From State Feminism to Market Feminism?," *International Political Science Review* 33, no. 4 (September 2012): 382–400; Dorothy E. McBride and Amy G. Mazur, *The Politics of State Feminism: Innovation in Comparative Research* (Philadelphia, 2010); Dorothy McBride Stetson and Amy G. Mazur, eds., *Comparative State Feminism* (London, 1995); and Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (Oxford, 1996).

4. Amy G. Mazur and Dorothy E. McBride, "State Feminism since the 1980s: From Loose Notion to Operationalized Concept," *Politics & Gender* 3, no. 4 (December 2007): 502.

5. Barbara Wolfe Jancar, *Women under Communism* (Baltimore, 1978), 504.

6. *Ibid.*, 106

that attempted a sustained examination of the inner workings of communist women's organizations in the eastern bloc.<sup>7</sup> In both cases, the texts were written before the critical interventions of postcolonial studies, and it was American political scientists who were defining the "appropriate" goal of a true feminist movement: the emancipation of women as autonomous, individual subjects. Jancar writes as follows: "Throughout history, women have served the patriarchal establishment, whether as supporters of the status quo or as revolutionaries seeking to replace one variant of male political order with another. Women are continuing this support in the Communist countries. . . . The fact of the matter is that in no Communist country do we find policies toward women—or men for that matter—directed at their self actualization."<sup>8</sup>

Jancar does not theorize the concept of self-actualization other than to say that the goals of feminism have entered a new stage, in which "the question [of feminism] is not how to better one's material standard of living, but how to improve the quality of one's life," and that "the current women's movement in the United States exemplifies this new stage."<sup>9</sup> The first assumption is that feminists should no longer be concerned with their "material standard of living," and the second, implicit assumption is that self-actualization is a form of individual empowerment that must be achieved independent of the state and society (and most likely in the United States!).

One set of problems with the current stereotype of communist women's organizations, therefore, is that it is derivative of a liberal feminist politics that is universalistic and insensitive to cultural variation in women's definitions of self-actualization. In her study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, the anthropologist Saba Mahmood argues that pious Islamic women find self-actualization through actively practicing the affects and comportments necessary to embody the kind of submission that they deem appropriate for women. These Egyptian women embraced a politics of submission and used their shared commitment to the Islamic feminine ideal as the basis for public action, thus leading Mahmood to question the feminist valorization of the emancipated political subject.<sup>10</sup> Building on Mahmood's work, Japanologist Amy Borovoy and I have challenged the idea that feminist political projects should only be operationalized with the goal of creating individual, autonomous political subjects.<sup>11</sup> The idea that women's self-actualization requires the production of individual, autonomous subjects liberated from all social obligations reifies a particularly Anglo-American conception of the feminist project. If self-actualization is about improving "the quality of one's life," then women may decide that improving the material conditions of their families, communities, or even states is an important part of their own sense of self-fulfillment. Thus, broadening the definition of self-actualization allows us to

7. Sharon Lee Wolchik, "Politics, Ideology and Equality: The Status of Women in Eastern Europe" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1978).

8. Jancar, *Women under Communism*, 206–7.

9. *Ibid.*, 210.

10. Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2005).

11. Amy Borovoy and Kristen Ghodsee, "Decentering Agency in Feminist Theory: Social Democracy, Postsocialism, and the Re-engagement of the Social Good," *Women's Studies International Forum* 35 (2012): 153–65.

reconsider women's movements and organizations that have been previously regarded as insufficiently feminist because they do not focus exclusively on the individual.

A second set of issues with the received wisdom about communist mass women's organizations is that it privileges independent, nongovernmental organizations over state-based policy agencies and women's mass organizations even when there is clear evidence of the latter's significant achievements in terms of women's literacy, education, legal equality, reproductive rights, and incorporation into the labor force—achievements that must have contributed to women's self-actualization. Even when these achievements are grudgingly recognized, they are discredited because they came from the top down rather than the bottom up. For example, McBride and Mazur argue that

women's policy machinery will reach high levels of state feminism, on the one hand, when the state is defined as a site of social justice and has the structural capacity to institutionalize new demands for equality, and on the other, when society sustains widely supported feminist organizations that challenge sex hierarchies through both radical politics from outside and reform politics in unions and parties. . . . If these conditions do not exist, then although politicians may establish women's policy offices, these units will have a hard time either influencing women's equality policy or empowering women's interests in society or both. *As the contrasting case of Poland shows, when feminist organizing is absent and the state is impervious to democratic influence, women's policy machinery may even be used as a tool for authoritarian control.*<sup>12</sup>

In their edited collection, *Comparative State Feminism*, McBride and Mazur use the one case of communist Poland to set up a tautology whereby state feminism is only effective and desirable when there are independent women's organizations operating outside the formal structures of the state. And yet if one reads Jean Robinson's chapter on Poland, it is clear that the Liga Kobiet Polskich (Polish Women's League, LKP), albeit certainly constrained by their dependence on the Communist Party, was able to influence women's equality policy and empower women's interests in society.<sup>13</sup> Although Robinson also argues that an "independent civil society" is necessary for successful state feminism, she does acknowledge that the LKP, in its efforts to protect access to legal abortion services and introduce sex education into schools, opposed both the Polish state and the church, and that this did "suggest that the LK was more than merely a propaganda tool for the party."<sup>14</sup> That the entire theoretical apparatus of state feminism would exclude all communist countries from the possibility of successfully using the model based on one case study of Poland demonstrates that McBride and Mazur uncritically viewed all of these countries as an undifferentiated whole. Furthermore, they based their conclusions on a very narrow reading of this case study, using the lack of a civil society to undermine all of the LKP's achievements for women and ignoring the evidence that the Liga sometimes stood in opposition to the state.

12. Stetson and Mazur, eds., *Comparative State Feminism*, 290–91. Emphasis added.

13. Jean Robinson, "Women, the State, and the Need for Civil Society: The Liga Kobiet in Poland," in Stetson and Mazur, eds., *Comparative State Feminism*, 203–20.

14. Robinson, "Women, the State, and the Need for Civil Society," 212.

In 2005 Wang Zheng questioned the limited “intellectual parameters of feminist scholars” in her examination of the All-Chinese Women’s Federation (ACWF).<sup>15</sup> She writes, “The lack of desire or imagination to excavate women’s role in the policymaking process in the socialist state may have much to do with a fast-held assumption about the socialist state: it is too centralized and monolithic to have any space for women’s intervention.”<sup>16</sup> In her work Wang argues against the idea that the ACWF was merely an organ of the Chinese Communist Party, demonstrating that although they were forced to work within the system, women were able to challenge the Chinese patriarchal order, using the language of communism as an ideological tool.<sup>17</sup>

In the last few years more feminist scholars have begun to reassess the accomplishments of state socialist mass women’s organizations in Hungary and Romania, in Yugoslavia, and more broadly for the Women’s International Democratic Federation, an umbrella organization supported by the eastern bloc countries.<sup>18</sup> The present article hones in on the domestic activities of the CBWM, contributing to the broader scholarly effort to rethink the concept of self-actualization and challenging the presumption that women’s organizations must be independent from the state in order to be effective. The Bulgarian case provides additional evidence that socialist women’s organizations could advocate for women’s interests, and help to improve women’s quality of life, despite their relationship to the state.

## Methodology

The history of the CBWM’s domestic activities was gathered using a combination of archival research and ethnographic interviews with Bulgarian women associated with the CBWM between 1968 and 1990. The primary archival collections consulted for this study include the official archive of the CBWM in the Central State Archive in Sofia, Bulgaria, and the personal papers of its long-standing president, Elena Lagadinova.<sup>19</sup> I also consulted back issues of *Zhenata dnes* (the Woman Today), the CBWM’s official monthly magazine, and of *Biuletin* (the Bulletin), its official monthly newsletter, as well as a variety of

15. Wang Zheng, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 519.

16. *Ibid.*, 520.

17. See also Wang Zheng, “Creating a Socialist Feminist Cultural Front: *Women of China* (1949–1966),” *China Quarterly*, no. 204 (December 2010): 827–49.

18. On the organizations in Hungary and Romania, see Raluca Maria Popa, “Translating Equality between Women and Men across Cold War Divides: Women Activists from Hungary and Romania and the Creation of International Women’s Year,” in Shana Penn and Jill Massino, eds., *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (London, 2009); in Yugoslavia, Chiari Bonfiglioli, “Revolutionary Networks: Women’s Political and Social Activism in Cold War Italy and Yugoslavia (1945–1957)” (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2012); and in the eastern bloc more broadly, Francisca de Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms.”

19. Tsentralen dŕrzhaven arkhiv (hereafter TsDA), fond (f.) 417, opis (o.) 1–7, arkhivna edinitisa (a.e.) multiple. For the documents that come from the personal archive of Elena Lagadinova, I refer to them by their title and date, followed by the abbreviation PAoEL. All translations from the Bulgarian are my own or that of my research assistant, Miroslava Nikolova.



official CBWM publications held in the Bulgarian National Library (Narodna biblioteka "Sv. sv. Kiril i Metodii") and in the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University.

The archival evidence is supplemented by interviews that I conducted with sixteen Bulgarian women who were journalists and activists with the CBWM. At the time that I began this research, in 2010, the youngest of these women was sixty-eight years old and the oldest was ninety. These interviews were usually conducted in Bulgarian in the women's homes and lasted several hours each. Interviews were conducted in June–July 2010, March 2011, July 2011, March 2012, July 2012, March 2013, and July–August 2013. They total more than four hundred hours, including over ninety hours of ethnographic interviews with Elena Lagadinova. Archival research and ethnographic interviewing were conducted simultaneously. Through a dialectic process of inquiry, I asked questions and sought answers not only from the historical record but also from the recollections of those responsible for producing that record. Due to space limitations, I disproportionately rely on the archival materials for this article, but my arguments here are thoroughly informed by the extensive interviews that I have conducted in the last four years.<sup>20</sup>

### The Bulgarian Women's "Revolution"

The history of feminist activism in Bulgaria is rich—too rich to explore in one journal article. The Bŭlgarski zhenski suiuz (Bulgarian Women's Union) was founded in 1901, and women were actively organizing throughout the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> Although the Dimitrov Constitution (the Constitution of Bulgaria in effect from 1947 to 1971) finally granted women full legal equality with men in 1947, this article focuses on the "great women's revolution" that occurred in Bulgaria beginning in the mid-1960s.

Writing retrospectively in 2003, the Bulgarian journalist and sociologist Maria Dinkova argued that the most progressive leap forward for Bulgarian women came during the third decade of communist rule.<sup>22</sup> In her own recounting of the early days of this "great women's revolution," Dinkova attributes its early success to two key women who were working within the structure of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). Both of them were committed Marxists and had been politically active in the struggle against the Nazi-allied Bulgar-

20. This article is part of a larger book project, which aims to be a salvage ethnography of the Bulgarian women's committee. The historian Maria Todorova has argued that it is imperative to document the experiences of people who lived through the communist era, likening this to the process of salvage ethnography. This term was originally used to describe the work of American anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century who were recording the languages, theologies, and folklores of Native American tribes before they became assimilated into mainstream white American culture. Todorova asserts that the experiences of those who lived under communism are rapidly being lost as the older generation dies off. See the introduction by Maria Todorova in Maria Todorova, ed., *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (New York, 2010), 14.

21. Krassimira Daskalova, "The Woman's Movement in Bulgaria in a Life Story," *Women's History Review* 13, no. 1 (March 2004): 91–103.

22. Maria Dinkova, "Strasti po velikata zhenska revoliutsiia," *Vesni*, 2003, no. 5: 27–30; Dinkova, "Strasti po velikata zhenska revoliutsiia," *Vesni*, 2003, nos. 6–7: 24–25; and Dinkova, "Strasti po velikata zhenska revoliutsiia," *Vesni*, 2008, no. 6: 33–62.

ian monarchy during World War II. Both were empowered to act on behalf of Bulgarian women, and like state feminists in Scandinavia each woman used her position of authority and influence to push through policy changes that would help to improve the quality of Bulgarian women's lives.

The first woman was Sonia Bakish. She was a member of the editorial collective of *Zhenata dnes* from 1958 to 1980 and served as its editor-in-chief for over seventeen years.<sup>23</sup> Born in 1925, Bakish was the Jewish Bulgarian wife of Stanko Todorov, a member of the Politburo and the longest serving Prime Minister of Bulgaria. As an editor, Bakish was determined to make the magazine relevant to Bulgarian women. Beginning in 1965, Bakish hired a team of young journalists who believed that while socialism had solved some of the problems facing Bulgarian women, it had created a host of new ones.<sup>24</sup> Maria Dinkova was one of the young journalists who became a member of the editorial collective, and I had the opportunity to interview her in 2010, 2011, and 2012.

According to Dinkova, it was Bakish who decided to publish articles in *Zhenata dnes* that pointed out deficiencies in the state socialist system. Ordinarily, all journalism was subject to oversight by a special subcommittee of the Central Committee of the BCP. This committee singled out several early articles published in *Zhenata dnes* in 1967, 1968, and 1969, claiming that they were not sufficiently laudatory of communism's achievements. Bakish, perhaps enjoying the protection afforded by having her husband on the Politburo, insisted that women's issues needed to be addressed and she pushed the status quo.

Bakish's decision to discuss real women's problems increased the popularity of what was already a popular magazine.<sup>25</sup> *Zhenata dnes* had one of the largest publishing circulations in Bulgaria.<sup>26</sup> The magazine had started in 1945 with twenty-four pages and a circulation of twenty thousand. By 1976 the magazine was forty-eight-pages long and there were four hundred thousand copies in Bulgarian and one hundred twenty thousand in Russian.<sup>27</sup> In a letter to Aleksandŭr Lilov, a secretary of the Central Committee, the CBWM complained that there were at least one hundred thousand Bulgarian women who wanted a subscription to the magazine, but they were unable to meet this demand because they had used up their paper quota.<sup>28</sup> By the end of the 1970s *Zhenata dnes* was allowed to print five hundred thousand Bulgarian and one hundred thousand Russian editions for a population of about 4.5 million women, meaning that almost one in every seven Bulgarian women received the magazine.<sup>29</sup> *Zhenata dnes* not only promoted the discussion of women's is-

23. "Zhenata dnes—zhena s minalo: Nai-dulgoletnoto bŭlgarsko spisanie navarshi 60 godini," *Zhenata dnes*, 2005, no. 1: 112–16.

24. Ibid, 112.

25. Joana Pavlova, "Razshiriavanena 'chastnoto' prostranstvo v publichnoto: Spisanie 'Zhenata dnes' prez 1954–1958 g.," in Krassimira Daskalova and Tatyana Kmetova, *Gender and Transition, 1938–1958* (Sofia, 2011), 189–200.

26. Maria Dinkova, personal communication, July 2010, Sofia, Bulgaria.

27. TsDA, f. 417, o. 4, a.e. 492, list (ll.) 71–72.

28. Ibid.

29. Mira Badzheva, "Sonia Bakish: Dnes zhenata e po-agresivna. No prava li e?," *Zhenata dnes*, 2005, no. 1: 136–38.

sues among women domestically, it became a valuable platform for dialogue between the committee and ordinary working women.<sup>30</sup>

The revenue from subscriptions went directly into the budget of the CBWM. This income was one of the most important factors supporting the independence of the CBWM from the central communist authorities.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the Liga Kobiet in Poland, which was dependent on the Communist Party for its finances, the CBWM had its own discretionary funds.<sup>32</sup> The CBWM used this money to support a wide variety of domestic initiatives, including the funding of key studies that provided empirical evidence for the ongoing problems experienced by women in communist Bulgaria. Thus, Bakish's stewardship of the publication increased not only its own readership but also the financial strength of the CBWM.

The other key figure in the Bulgarian women's movement was Elena Lagadinova. Like Bakish, Lagadinova fought in WWII. Beginning at age eleven, she was the youngest female partisan in a family of national heroes, a *iatak* (helper or supporter of partisans) running messages to her father and brothers in the mountains.<sup>33</sup> After the war Lagadinova was sent to the Soviet Union for her education. She earned a doctoral degree in biology. Upon her return to Bulgaria she was appointed as an agricultural geneticist in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Lagadinova spent thirteen years as a working scientist, eventually earning her *habilitation*.<sup>34</sup>

In 1945 an antifascist hero named Tsola Dragoicheva was charged with the creation of a women's committee. This committee was called the Narodni zhenski sujuz (Bulgarian Popular Women's Union, BPWU) and was handed over to yet another prominent communist, Rada Todorova.<sup>35</sup> Between 1946 and 1950 the BPWU busied itself with the task of eradicating illiteracy among women and increasing their access to education and employment.<sup>36</sup> By 1950, however, Bulgaria's Stalinist double, Valko Chervenkov, decided that Bulgarian women did not need a separate women's organization. The BPWU was dissolved. All domestic activities regarding women's issues devolved to the women's desks of the Fatherland Front, the trade unions, and the cooperatives.<sup>37</sup> There did remain a national Committee of Democratic Bulgarian Women, still headed by Todorova, but it was only empowered to represent

30. Ibid.

31. TsDA, f. 417, o. 2, a.e. 1, ll.14–16. The CBWM's annual budgets are also archived in TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 572, ll. 1–26.

32. Robinson, "Women, the State, and the Need for Civil Society," 205–10.

33. Fredda Brilliant, "Madame Elena Lagadinova," in Fredda Brilliant, ed., *Women in Power* (New Delhi, 1987), 77. See also Jean Lipman-Blumen, *Connective Leadership: Managing in a Changing World* (Oxford, 1996), 299. Unlike partisans who lived in the mountains on a permanent basis, the *iatatsi* were those allied with the partisans who lived in town and were thus at greater risk of being caught.

34. A *habilitation* is the highest academic qualification a scholar can achieve in Bulgaria and several other European countries. Lagadinova keeps a rich personal archive of all of her diplomas and curriculum vitae.

35. TsDA, f. 417, o. 2, a.e. 1, ll. 1–4.

36. Maria Dinkova, *The Social Progress of the Bulgarian Woman* (Sofia, 1972), 60–61.

37. Iliana Marcheva, "Istoriata na edna predizvestena smürt ili kraiat na organizirano zhenko dvizhenie v Bülgariia (1944–1950)," *Epokhi* 5, no. 2: (1998) 60–61.



Bulgaria at international forums.<sup>38</sup> It had no authority over domestic women's issues.

In 1954 Todor Zhivkov became the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. He presided over a massive transformation and industrialization of Bulgaria's economy.<sup>39</sup> After the first decade of his rule, Zhivkov decided that technical expertise was just as important as loyalty to the Communist Party when it came to running state enterprises. In 1968 he introduced a new plan to give greater control of Bulgaria's economy to scientific experts and technocrats, thereby reducing the influence of Communist Party cadres.<sup>40</sup> This bold step was a precursor to the 1971 Zhivkov Constitution, which consolidated Todor Zhivkov's own power while at the same time trying to increase the "democratic" participation of Bulgarian citizens through a reinvigoration of mass organizations.

By 1968 Bulgarian women had been fully incorporated into the labor force but at a huge cost to the prospects for future population growth. Anecdotal evidence suggested that women were finding it difficult to combine productive labor in the formal economy with reproductive labor in the home. Birth rates had declined dramatically. The higher-ups in the BCP decided that the Bulgarian Women's Committee needed to be reorganized and empowered to work domestically once again.<sup>41</sup> In 1967 Elena Lagadinova was handpicked by Zhivkov and reluctantly left her post at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences to become the president of the new Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement. This reorganization of the CBWM increased its authority over all issues related to women and families, including its ability to propose legislation and to sue state enterprises that failed to comply with the laws protecting female employees.<sup>42</sup> Lagadinova was a scientist, not a politician. Zhivkov may have felt that the demographic decline in Bulgaria was a social phenomenon that needed a "scientific" solution.

### The Structure of a Socialist Mass Organization

The structure of the new committee was similar to all other mass organizations in Bulgaria during the Zhivkov era (1954–89).<sup>43</sup> At the national level, there was the Political Bureau of the CBWM that consisted of a president and

38. TsDA, f. 417, o. 2, a.e. 15, ll. 58–69; TsDA, f. 417, o. 2, a.e. 1, ll. 14–16. A. Luleva, "Zhenskiiat vapros' v sotsialisticheska Bŭlgariia—ideologiiia, politika, realnost," in *Soltzializmŭt: Iliuzni i realnost, etnologichni aspekti na vsekidnevната kultura. Sbornik dokladi ot mezhdunarodna nauchna konferentsiia* (Sofia, 2003), 155–75.

39. See John D. Bell, *The Bulgarian Communist Party from Blagoev to Zhivkov* (Stanford, 1985).

40. See Henry Schaefer, "Zhivkov's Great Society," *Radio Free Europe Research*, 23 September 1968, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, at [www.osaarchivum.org/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/7-1-76.shtml](http://www.osaarchivum.org/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/7-1-76.shtml) (no longer available).

41. Komitet na dvizhenieto na bŭlgarskite zheni, *Natsionalna konferentsiia na bŭlgarskite zheni (23 i 24 septemvri 1968 g.)* (Sofia, 1969), 224–27; see also TsDA, f. 417, o. 4, a.e. 3, ll. 1–5.

42. Jancar, *Women under Communism*, 107.

43. See, for instance, Ulf Brunnbauer, "Making Bulgarians Socialist: The Fatherland Front in Communist Bulgaria, 1944–1989," *East European Politics & Societies* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 44.

several secretaries who were the de facto leaders of the CBWM. These women represented the mass organization to the Bulgarian government and on the international stage. The women in the national bureau were technically elected at national conferences, but these elections often simply confirmed political appointments. At the regional level, there was a branch of the CBWM in each of Bulgaria's municipalities.<sup>44</sup> These municipal branches had their own local bureaus with their own presidents and secretaries. The officers were elected at municipal conferences by their local constituencies.<sup>45</sup> Only the members of the national bureau and the presidents of the municipal bureaus were paid employees of the state. All other positions were voluntary, filled by women who had formal employment obligations elsewhere. Despite the additional burden of this volunteer work, the CBWM had active support from ordinary women across the country.<sup>46</sup>

Part of the reason for its broad constituency was the committee's open door policy to all Bulgarian women, whether they were official members of the Communist Party or not. Unlike many other organizations, the committee accepted women who were *bezpartien* (without party affiliations). Also, their activities were open to all, and local women had the opportunity to suggest activities that they would like to have sponsored in their towns and villages. Veselina Grueva, who was the national secretary in charge of domestic activities from 1975 to 1990, explained to me, in 2011, "All of the ideas for the women's programs came from the women's organizations themselves. They could initiate the things they wanted and we would sponsor them. We worked with a lot of different partners in society to realize these programs. And we made a lot of progress in increasing women's cultural knowledge in the rural areas. It was very inspired work."<sup>47</sup> Anna Durcheva spent a decade working for the committee in the 1980s, despite the fact that she had no formal party affiliation. She explained to me that "Elena [Lagadinova] didn't care who you were or what meetings you went to; she cared that you were a good worker."<sup>48</sup>

The detailed records of the women who participated in the CBWM's Third National Congress, in 1979, confirm the organization's representative nature. According to the official records, there were 809 delegates in attendance, representing all walks of Bulgarian life. While 651 of the delegates were members of the Bulgarian Communist Party, 44 were members of the Bulgarian Agricultural National Union, 38 were members of the Komsomol, and 76 were "without party." There was also a wide range of ages and professions: 142 delegates were under thirty-five, and 107 were over the Bulgarian retirement age for women, fifty-five. Among the delegates, 112 had only a primary school education, and 70 were employed in agricultural labor. From the 809 total delegates, the conference was responsible for electing 171 members to be

44. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 1, ll. 5–70.

45. TsDA, f. 417, o. 4, a.e. 3, ll. 5–12.

46. The CBWM's monthly bulletin detailed a wide array of activities organized at the municipal level, including cooking courses, book clubs, political discussions, and expert lectures on topics such as childrearing and interior design. These activities proved to be very popular with local women, who used them as a way to socialize with each other.

47. Veselina Grueva, personal communication, July 2011, Sofia, Bulgaria.

48. Anna Durcheva, personal communication, March 2013, Sofia, Bulgaria.

direct representatives to the National Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and to choose its 13 bureau members. Of these 171 members of the national committee, 121 had a university education, 45 had secondary school, and 5 of them had only primary school. The range of professions was very diverse, as were their ages: 23 of the new members chosen in 1979 were under thirty years old, and another 72 members were under forty.<sup>49</sup>

### Working within the System

Although Lagadinova came to the CBWM presidency in 1968 with no experience in politics, she was a well-educated researcher and seasoned lab scientist. Rather than relying solely on Marxist or Leninist doctrines to guide social policy, Lagadinova and the generation of technocrats empowered by Todor Zhivkov after 1968 endeavored to put the "scientific" back into scientific socialism.<sup>50</sup> The Bulgarian Communist Party had previously claimed to have solved the "woman question" by expanding equal access to education and fully incorporating women into the labor force. The declining birthrate, however, showed that Bulgarian women had a new set of problems with which to grapple.

Sonia Bakish would fire the first shots in the great women's revolution.<sup>51</sup> *Zhenata dnes* published a series of articles addressing Bulgarian women's problems in the late 1960s. The first of these was a two-part exposé by the journalists Penka Duhteva and Maria Dinkova on the working conditions of women employed in construction enterprises.<sup>52</sup> Fearing that the bureaucrats in the Central Committee might prevent the publication of an article overtly critical of communist policies, Bakish ran this piece accompanied by a bold-faced quote by Vladimir Lenin. The quote was taken from an article Lenin published in *Pravda* in November 1921. It was the first sentence of a longer passage that enjoins the Bolsheviks not to rest on their revolutionary laurels which reads in full: "*The best way to celebrate the anniversary of a great revolution is to concentrate attention on its unsolved problems. It is particularly appropriate and necessary to celebrate the revolution in this way at a time when we are faced with fundamental problems that the revolution has not yet solved, and when we must master something new (from the point of view of what the revolution has accomplished up to now) for the solution of these problems.*"<sup>53</sup>

Quoting Lenin allowed the editorial collective at *Zhenata dnes* to promote the idea that tackling new problems was an appropriate endeavor for communists to pursue, one sanctioned by the great father of the Russian revolution himself. Bakish and her editorial collective could demonstrate their loyalty to

49. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 1, ll. 5–70.

50. Lagadinova knew firsthand about the problem of mixing politics with science. She had studied under Trofim Lysenko in the Soviet Union.

51. Dinkova, "Strasti po velikata zhenska revoliutsiia," *Vensi*, 2003, no. 5.

52. Penka Duhteva and Maria Dinkova, "Zhenata v stroitelstvoto," *Zhenata dnes*, 1969, no. 7: 4–8.

53. V. I. Lenin, "The Importance of Gold Now and After the Complete Victory of Socialism," in *Collected Works*, 45 vols. (Moscow, 1960–70), 33:109–16, at [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/nov/05.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/nov/05.htm) (last accessed 13 January 2014). Emphasis added.

the system while simultaneously saying that the system was not doing enough to address women's issues. Using this tactic, *Zhenata dnes* also published articles on sexology, premarital sex, and single motherhood, as well as an exposé on the changing contours of Bulgarian masculinity—all topics that might be considered too “bourgeois” for a communist women's magazine. Ironically, some Bulgarian feminist scholars in the postsocialist period tried to discredit the feminist intentions of socialist-era research on women precisely because they had tended to quote Karl Marx and Lenin.<sup>54</sup> What these scholars failed to recognize is that citing Marx and Lenin was often necessary in order to publish findings that were critical of the government. This point was made clear to me not only by Maria Dinkova but also by two other journalists who had written for *Zhenata dnes* in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>55</sup> Bakish was politically savvy enough to use this convention to push for better working conditions for women.

Another example of the cryptopolitical activism of the editorial collective at *Zhenata dnes* and the political bureau of the CBWM was the national survey they initiated in 1969. In order to reverse the falling birthrate, it was important first to understand why women were not having more children. Had Bulgarian women recently developed a preference for smaller families? Or was the low birth rate a product of social conditions that made it difficult for women to have the number of children they actually wanted? Although sociology was a suspicious discipline in most communist countries, the only way to get this information was to ask women directly. With the permission of the Central Committee of the BCP, Bakish and Lagadinova were able to mount a massive survey effort in coordination with the Central Statistical Office, the Georgi Dimitrov Center for Scientific Investigations and Training, and the Labor Research Institute. The survey, titled “Women in Production, Social Life, and the Family,” consisted of multiple-choice questions. It was distributed to all subscribers of *Zhenata dnes*. The survey received 16,060 anonymous replies from around the country.<sup>56</sup> Using the data collected, the CBWM was able to piece together a relatively accurate picture of the lives of ordinary Bulgarian women, including detailed time budgets.

The survey produced three key findings. The first was that most Bulgarian women said that they wanted more children than they currently had. Of the women surveyed, 33 percent had only one child, but less than 15 percent said that they wanted to have only one child. About 50 percent of the women surveyed had two children, but 57 percent said that two children was their ideal. The number of women who said they wanted three children was almost double that of those who actually had three children. Overall, the survey

54. See, for instance, Roumyana Slabakova, “Research on Women in Bulgaria: The Hard Way into the Future,” in “Women's Studies in Europe,” special issue, *Women's Studies Quarterly* 20, nos. 3/4 (Fall–Winter, 1992): 136–43.

55. I spent an entire afternoon with Dinkova in the summer of 2011 going through twenty years' worth of back issues of the magazine in a reading room in the National Library in Sofia. She was able to tell me exactly which articles had caused controversy and explain how the magazine had navigated around the censors.

56. “Anketna karta: Zhenata v proizvodstvoto, ocshtestveniaa zhivot i semeistvoto,” PaoEL.



**Figure 1. “WOMEN WANT TO HAVE MORE CHILDREN!” A handmade placard used to convince Todor Zhivkov and select members of the Bulgarian Politburo to expand social supports for working mothers. Photo by the author.**

found that while Bulgarian women in 1969 had an average of 1.84 children, they wanted to have an average of 2.28 children.

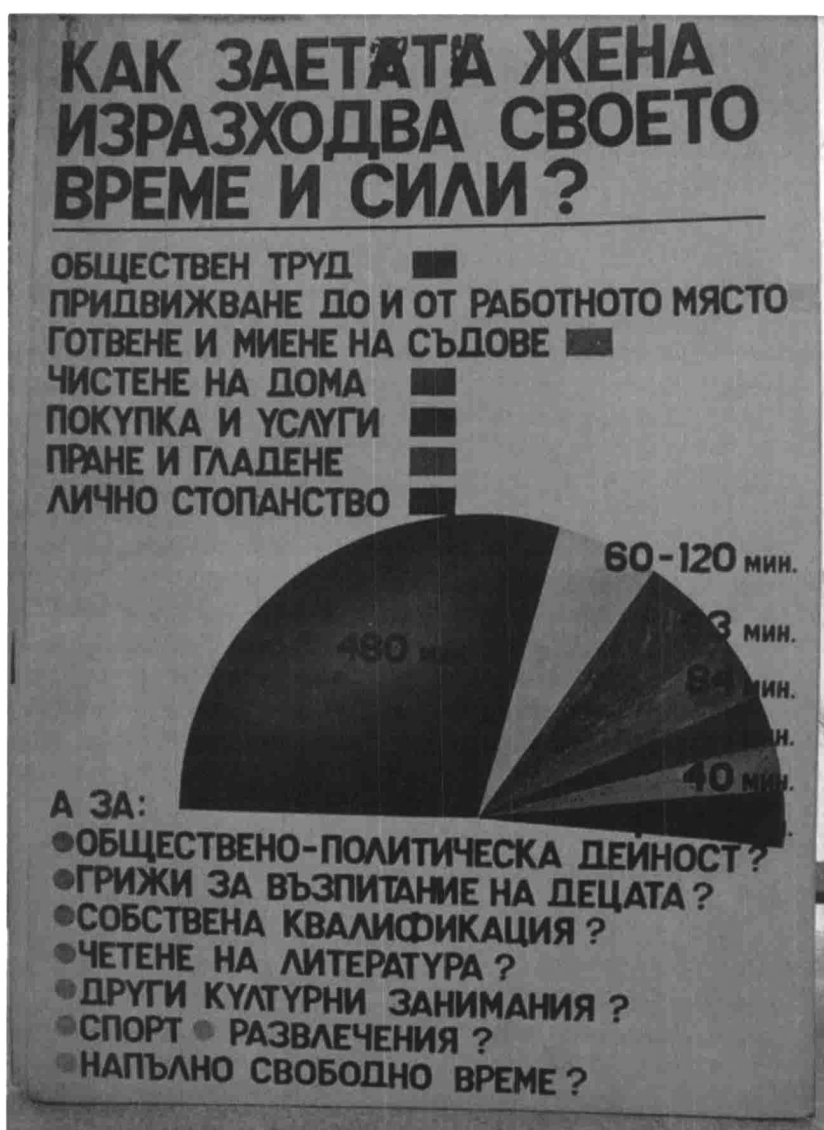
The women in the survey were also asked a series of questions about how they balanced work and family responsibilities. The survey found that only 22.8 percent of children under the age of seven were cared for in state-funded kindergartens or crèches.<sup>57</sup> Bulgarian women also reported that 8 percent of

57. All figures taken from the placards prepared by Elena Lagadinova for a meeting with Todor Zhivkov to discuss women’s issues in 1971, PAoEL.



children under seven years of age were left at home by themselves while their parents were at work. Women were now incorporated into the labor force, but the CBWM survey found that they were desperately cobbling together childcare. Although they tried to utilize grandparents and husbands as much as possible, the primary responsibility for looking after young children still fell on mothers.

Furthermore, Bulgarian women were asked the following question: “What prevents you from having more children?” While 22 percent felt they were already too old, 26 percent claimed that they did not have the strength to work



**Figure 2. A placard displaying the results of the 1969 time budget study, “HOW DOES THE BUSY WOMAN SPEND HER TIME AND EFFORT?” According to the chart, Bulgarian women worked approximately fourteen hours a day. Photo by the author.**

and raise children at the same time. A further 20 percent responded that they did not have the material resources (*materialni resursi*) to have another child, and another 11 percent felt that their homes were not big enough. Thus, more than half of the women surveyed claimed that it was a scarcity of time or resources that prevented them from having the number of children that they wanted.

The severity of this situation was made even more apparent by the time-budget data. The survey found that while women spent eight hours a day at work, they spent an additional one to two hours commuting to and from the workplace. On top of this, they spent another four and a half hours cooking, cleaning the house, shopping for household necessities, washing and ironing, and working on private agricultural plots. These fourteen-and-a-half-hour days meant that women had little time for the other activities that the communist government claimed to be important for its citizens.

The CBWM and *Zhenata dnes* had confirmed what individual Bulgarian women already knew: they had no time to spend with their children, let alone for social and political activism, further education and training, reading literature, participating in cultural activities or sports, or any other forms of recreation. It was clear that communist emancipation for women in the workplace had done little to lighten women's responsibilities in the home. This double burden was a key factor informing the falling birthrate.<sup>58</sup>

Once the nature of the problem became clear, the CBWM began to consider different policies to allow women to have the larger families they said they wanted.<sup>59</sup> One solution was to reduce the obligation of women's employment outside the home. For both ideological and practical reasons, however, the leaders of the CBWM did not pursue this course. First, Marxist-Leninist doctrines demanded women's full participation in society in order to reduce their economic dependence on men and to ensure sexual equality. Second, most communist countries, including Bulgaria, needed women's labor in order to forge ahead with rapid industrialization. Third, mass literacy campaigns and an almost universal commitment to women's education and training meant that the communist state had already invested heavily in developing women's human capital. Not to make use of their skills would be a waste of talent, particularly since women now dominated the white-collar professions of law, medicine, education, and banking.<sup>60</sup> Finally, for many Bulgarian women, paid employment outside the home, even if compulsory, was a form of self-actualization. The survey found that women wanted to be both mothers and workers. They merely desired help in balancing these two responsibilities.<sup>61</sup>

Another way to increase the birthrate was to severely limit women's access to abortion, the primary form of birth control. By 1969 the number of abortions had far outstripped the actual birth rate.<sup>62</sup> Bulgaria's northern neighbor,

58. Valentina Bodrova and Richard Anker, eds., *Working Women in Socialist Countries: The Fertility Connection* (Geneva, 1985).

59. Dinkova, "Strasti po velikata zhenska revoliutsiia," *Vensi*, 2003, no. 5.

60. Kristen Ghodsee, *The Red Riviera: Gender, Tourism, and Postsocialism on the Black Sea* (Durham, 2005), 54–56.

61. "Anketna karta," PaoEL.

62. Velitchko Dobrianov et al., "Bulgaria," in Bodrova and Anker, eds., *Working Women in Socialist Countries*, 66–67.

Romania, had already placed heavy restrictions on access to abortion in 1966, after having had some of the most liberal abortion laws in Europe. Indeed, it had one of the most violently repressive pro-natalist regimes in the entire eastern bloc.<sup>63</sup> The Bulgarian communist elites did consider a similar policy of restricting abortions, but the CBWM, like the Liga Kobiet in Poland, strongly recommended against this course of action. Instead, the committee advocated a massive expansion of state entitlements for mothers.

Rather than allowing women to retreat from the labor force or compelling them to have babies, the CBWM proposed socializing as much domestic labor as possible. Their proposal called on the communist government to dramatically expand the construction of crèches and kindergartens. They also advocated a new policy of maternity leaves that would allow women two years of paid leave from their jobs with a guarantee that the positions would be held for them in their absence. Furthermore, time spent on maternity leave was to count as labor service. The CBWM proposal included a provision for child allowances, which the state would pay to new mothers on the birth of a baby. These allowances would steadily increase with each subsequent child, up to three children. The CBWM advocated the expansion of workplace cafeterias in which meals could be prepared for women to take home after their factory shifts. Ideally, these policies would reduce the double burden on individual women.<sup>64</sup> At the time this was proposed, in 1970, no other socialist country had such a generous set of maternity provisions in place to support working mothers.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the USSR would not get a comprehensive maternity leave policy until 1981.<sup>66</sup>

But entitlements like these would be expensive, drawing resources away from the development of heavy industry, which was an economic priority. Luckily, the CBWM had three key allies. The first was Tsola Dragoicheva, who had founded the original Bulgarian Popular Women's Union and gone on to become one of the most senior members of the Bulgarian Politburo.<sup>67</sup> Sonia Bakish's husband was also a Politburo member, and he may have lent support to his wife's cause. Todor Zhivkov's daughter, Liudmila Zhivkova, was quickly working her way up the political ranks and undoubtedly had influence over her widowed father.<sup>68</sup> She had worked with the CBWM and *Zhenata dnes* on the promotion of Bulgarian arts and culture and attended the first UN Conference on Women, in Mexico City, with Elena Lagadinova. Zhivkova likely had a hand in promoting women's issues behind the scenes.

63. Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley, 1998).

64. On the example of the Soviet Union and the early work of Zhenotdel, see Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, 2000).

65. Inna Leykin, "'Population Prescriptions': State, Morality, and Population Politics in Contemporary Russia" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2012).

66. Sergei Zakharov, "Russian Federation: From the First to Second Demographic Transition," *Demographic Research* 19, no. 24 (July 2008): 907–72.

67. Iliiana Marcheva, "Bŭlgarskata Leidi Stalin: Tsola Dragoicheva," in *Bŭlgarskite dŭrzhavnitsi: 1944–1989 g.* (Sofia, 2005) 117–30.

68. Bogomil Rainov, *Liudmila: Mechti i dela* (Sofia, 2003).

After concerted advocacy efforts, the CBWM's research and detailed proposal were ultimately successful. On 6 March 1973 the Politburo issued an official decision. This decision, "Enhancing the Role of Women in the Building of a Developed Socialist Society," valorized women's roles as both workers and mothers, and it authorized massive budget expenditures to expand state support for women.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps more importantly, the Politburo instituted only a limited ban on abortions. Abortion remained safe, legal, and easily available for all single and divorced women, as well as for women caring for two or more children (even if those children were not biologically their own). The only women who could not attain legal abortions were married women with fewer than two children in their care. Lagadinova and the CBWM opposed this measure. "No woman should be forced to have a child that she does not want," Lagadinova told me in 2012. "It is bad for the child and it is bad for society." Despite the women's committee's objections, this more limited ban on abortion was included in the decision.

Another important component of the 1973 decision was that it strengthened the role of the CBWM in making sure that Bulgarian enterprises implemented the new laws. Since 1968 the committee had been empowered to carry out something called *narodna kontrol* (people's control), or *obshtestven kontrol* (societal control).<sup>70</sup> They had the right to represent women to other state agencies. For instance, they could make sure that pregnant women were moved to more suitable work posts if their current jobs were too strenuous. Furthermore, if an employer did not give a woman maternity leave, or did not hold her job for her during her absence, she could complain to the CBWM, which could take up the matter with the enterprise directors.

After the 1973 decision the CBWM became more aggressive. It sent representatives out across the country to ensure that enterprises committed the resources necessary to build onsite crèches for lactating mothers. The Committee also gave regular updates to the Central Committee of the BCP about whether the decision was being fully implemented. In one letter from Elena Lagadinova to the Central Committee in 1977, she chastised the government for failing to build the number of crèches and kindergartens to which they had committed themselves.<sup>71</sup> A similar letter was sent to Stanko Todorov, complaining that there were still eighteen thousand children without child care facilities, and blaming the government for not allocating the necessary resources to fulfill the plan.<sup>72</sup> In a different report to Todorov, Lagadinova explained in exhaustive detail the architectural and interior designs appropriate for crèches and kindergartens.<sup>73</sup>

69. "Za izdigane roliata na zhenata v izgrazhdaneto na razvitoto sostialisticheskoto obshtestvo," *Reshenie na Politbiuro na TsK na BKP ot 6 mart 1973 g.* (Sofia, 1977). For an extensive feminist analysis of this decision, see Savina Sharkova, "Sotsialisticheskata zhena mezhdur publichnoto i chastnoto (1967–1973): Vizii, protivorechiia i politicheski deistviia prez sotsializma v Bulgariia," *Godishnik na Sofiiskiiia universitet "Sv. Kliment Okhridski," Filisovski Fakultet, Kniga Psikhologiiiaa*, vol. 103 (Sofia, 2012), 61–80.

70. Veselina Grueva, personal communication, July 2011, Sofia, Bulgaria

71. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 493, ll. 48–50.

72. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 496, ll. 71–73.

73. *Ibid.*, ll. 17–29.

On a more mundane level, the CBWM sent out inspectors to make sure that women had clean bathrooms and functioning cafeterias in their workplaces and that cafeteria food was of a sufficiently high quality. In 1975, for instance, Lagadinova wrote a "warning note" to Professor Ivan Ilchev, the Vice President of the Council of Ministers and the President of the Commission on Living Conditions, complaining that the Khristo Mihailov factory in Mikhailovgrad did not have a workers' cafeteria. She noted that of the 1,007 workers, 830 were women, who were forced to bring their own meals and eat at their working stations. The committee insisted that a cafeteria be built immediately.<sup>74</sup>

The 1973 decision precipitated important changes to the labor code which also protected mothers with small children. The CBWM took pains to make sure that women were not forced to work longer hours to meet production quotas when they had young children at home. In a 1975 letter, Lagadinova pointed to several violations of Article 119 of the labor code; some enterprises were attempting to give women less maternity leave than provided by the code.<sup>75</sup> As with the 1973 decision, the CBWM was instrumental in making sure the new labor code was enforced and that delinquent enterprises were punished.<sup>76</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of the CBWM was the complaints department. Women from all over Bulgaria wrote letters asking for advice on both personal and professional issues. Veselina Grueva worked in the complaints department for fifteen years. She traveled around the country and encouraged women to write letters to the CBWM, promising that the committee would do its best to make sure that women's needs were addressed. In 1977 alone, the CBWM received 201 letters from citizens on various issues. In an analysis of these letters prepared for the Central Committee, the CBWM reported that eighty-four of these letters were questions about housing, forty-nine of which were from Sofia residents trying to secure an apartment. There were twenty-four letters from women trying to find suitable employment, another twenty-five about various legal questions, and the rest about miscellaneous personal problems.<sup>77</sup>

According to Grueva, the women working in the complaints section tried to answer every letter they received, even if the CBWM was unable to grant the writer's request. The committee had two lawyers who volunteered their time to help answer legal questions.<sup>78</sup> If the committee could not help directly, they forwarded the complaints to other state agencies.

This was very democratic. We [sometimes] met with women and listened to their concerns. We wrote protest letters on their behalf. For instance, when they passed the new family code in the 1980s, we spent a lot of time helping women figure out the new laws and how they could be applied to their

74. *Ibid.*, ll. 30–31.

75. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 496, l. 36.

76. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 495, ll. 99–105.

77. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 497, ll. 4–6.

78. Totka Dzhondzhorova-Penkova, "Trudovata konstitutsiia i zhenata," *Biuletin na Komiteta na bŭlgarski zheni*, 1986, no. 5: 8–15.



personal lives. We were very democratic. This is a form of democracy, to talk to the population, to listen to their concerns, and to act on them. It was not all black at the time. Yes, it was a totalitarian government, but we took a lot of initiatives to work on behalf of women and the work that we did was very valuable.<sup>79</sup>

The CBWM archives are full of letters written to the Central Committee to encourage them to consider the domestic production of goods that would benefit women and children. For instance, if you had a flatfooted child, there was no domestic supply of arch supports for footwear. The CBWM successfully lobbied to have a local factory produce them.<sup>80</sup> One 1977 report from the CBWM on the production of toys and sports equipment put forth detailed proposals for the production of high-quality, age-appropriate toys for children in kindergarten and for various sporting goods for children in primary and secondary school.<sup>81</sup> In another letter to the Central Committee, Lagadinova wrote to protest the lack of quality clothing being produced in Bulgaria, explaining that “the clothes which can be found now in the stores for our citizens are the ugliest that can be seen.”<sup>82</sup> She complained that the Ministry of Trade and Services was not doing its job. She wrote, “Jersey dresses, which are very practical, are rarely available in the stores. When they are, there are only limited sizes and they are not in the most fashionable styles.” She also goes on to state that while the supply of men’s underwear is adequate, women’s and youth underwear is only available in limited quantities and “are not in all the sizes or patterns or colors that the population is seeking.”<sup>83</sup> The committee also did research on western supermarkets in an attempt to reduce the burdens associated with shopping in a communist country.<sup>84</sup>

Domestic affairs and reproductive health informed the complaints of women who wrote letters to the committee. After commissioning a study, the CBWM learned that a significant number of cases were the result of male infertility caused by untreated venereal diseases. Once this was realized, the CBWM lobbied the military to make sure that all draftees were screened for diseases when they returned to base after a leave of absence. Both the CBWM and *Zhenata dnes* also attempted to redistribute some of the household labor to men by promoting the idea that Bulgarian men should be equal partners in the home. In 1983 there was a series of articles discussing the role of fathers and encouraging men to help their wives around the house, featuring photos of Bulgarian men knitting, boiling laundry, and feeding a baby.<sup>85</sup>

79. Veselina Grueva, personal communication, July 2011, Sofia, Bulgaria. This informant was still an open proponent of communism and believed very strongly that the ideal of communism should not be tainted by the lived experience of communism in Bulgaria in the twentieth century. As a result, she deliberately referred to the communist past as “totalitarian” to differentiate it from a potential future experiment with communism.

80. Elena Lagadinova, personal communication, July 2012, Sofia, Bulgaria.

81. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 493, ll. 25–29.

82. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 496, l. 34.

83. Ibid.

84. “Razvitie na supermarketite i gipermarketite vav Frantsiia,” *Nauka—tehnika—ikonomika: Barza informatsia*, no. 76.23.11, PAoEL.

85. Iasen Antov, “Gore glavata, bashti!,” *Zhenata dnes*, 1983, no. 11: 14–15; Stefan Smirnov, “Muzh bez slabosti,” *Zhenata dnes*, 1983, no. 12: 16–17.

A 1987 cover of *Zhenata dnes* even featured a young Bulgarian father walking on the street with an infant strapped to his chest in a forward-facing baby carrier.

Of course, not all of the CBWM's efforts were successful, particularly their attempts to challenge the traditional Bulgarian patriarchy. In one bold proposal, the CBWM lobbied the Union of Architects to rethink the traditional design for apartment blocks. The idea was that the first floor of every block would have an indoor playground and a pub. There men could sit together in the pub and watch the children, giving their wives some time away from the home. In the few rural cities where this was tried, however, men resisted the idea that childcare was their responsibility, especially when grandmothers lived nearby.<sup>86</sup> In another case, the CBWM proposed that marrying couples should write up prenuptial contracts to clearly delineate the distribution of resources in case of divorce. The authorities refused this idea because they thought it introduced too much calculation into what should be an institution based on love.<sup>87</sup>

Another major problem that the CBWM faced was women's ongoing frustration with the lack of disposable diapers (what Bulgarians referred to as *pampers*) and the dearth of feminine hygiene products.<sup>88</sup> Long before environmental concerns were a consideration, communist planners felt that disposable products such as sanitary napkins and pampers were wasteful.<sup>89</sup> There were no domestic facilities that produced them, and the Bulgarian government was unwilling to use hard currency to have them imported. Unfortunately, Bulgarian women were well aware that these products existed in the west. Their lack of availability in the socialist countries was often seen as a sign that their governments were growing increasingly out of touch with women's needs. The CBWM tried to argue that these products, although important, were not as essential for women as having paid maternity leaves, kindergartens, and child allowances (not to mention health care and free public education through to university). But their arguments fell on deaf ears. Ongoing consumer shortages were one of the biggest frustrations in life for women under communism.<sup>90</sup>

### International Activities

Despite these setbacks, and their continuing inability to remove the restrictions on abortion for married women with fewer than two children, Bulgaria was still among the countries with the most progressive legislation concern-

86. Anna Durcheva, personal communication, July 2012, Sofia, Bulgaria.

87. Elena Lagadinova, personal communication, March 2012, Sofia, Bulgaria.

88. Tatiana Kmetova, President of the Center for Women's Studies and Policies, personal communication, March 2012, Sofia, Bulgaria.

89. Planners tended to prefer concentrating resources on the production of durable and semidurable goods to the production of disposable consumer goods such as diapers and feminine hygiene products. On the logics of communist central planning see Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism and What Comes Next* (Princeton, 1996).

90. See, for instance, Slavenka Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (New York, 1993).

ing working women. As I have argued elsewhere, the CBWM were able to translate their domestic successes into international influence.<sup>91</sup> Armed with their 1973 Politburo decision, the Bulgarian delegation to the first United Nations World Conference on Women, in Mexico City in 1975, was able to boast of its generous social policies. Bulgarian women were guaranteed a fully paid pregnancy leave of 120 days before and after the birth of the first child (150 for the second, and 180 for the third) in addition to an extra six months of paid leave at the national minimum wage (seven months for the second child, and eight months for the third).<sup>92</sup> Women were also allowed to take unpaid leave until their child reached the age of three, when a kindergarten space was to be guaranteed. All of the time taken off from one's job was counted toward labor service (with regard to pensions), and an employer was obliged to hold a woman's position until her return.<sup>93</sup> These maternity provisions for women workers (including women in agriculture) made Bulgaria a role model not only for capitalist and developing countries but also for their allies in the socialist bloc.

Throughout the UN Decade for Women (1976–85), the leaders of the CBWM actively forged connections with women around the world. The CBWM hosted the first meeting of all of the leaders of the state socialist women's organizations participating in the Decade for Women in Sofia in 1976, and for the next nine years it took the lead on international women's activism.<sup>94</sup> The CBWM was instrumental in coordinating a broad coalition of progressive women; this included women in the eastern bloc, women in socialist-leaning countries in the developing world, and women with leftist sympathies in the west. By 1985 all of the leaders of the socialist women's organizations voted unanimously to have Elena Lagadinova serve as the General Rapporteur of the third United Nations World Conference on Women, held in Nairobi.<sup>95</sup> In recognition of her prominent role during the UN Decade for Women, Lagadinova was also chosen to represent the participating socialist countries as a member of the Board of Directors of the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) in 1985.<sup>96</sup>

The CBWM's international leadership on women's issues strengthened its domestic legitimacy. The CBWM touted its high-profile position at the United Nations to the Central Committee, strategically using the international recognition of Bulgaria's progressive policies to pressure the Politburo into following through on its commitments.<sup>97</sup> Despite its many successes, however, the CBWM still had to work within the political constraints of state socialism.

91. Kristen Ghodsee, "Rethinking State Socialist Mass Women's Organizations: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985," *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 49–73.

92. Maria Dinkova, "Otpuskat po maichinstvo—praktika i problemi," in *Zhenata: Trud i bit* (Sofia, 1977), 347–65.

93. Milanka Vidova, Nevjana Abadžieva, and Roumjana Gančeva, eds., *100 Questions and Answers concerning Bulgarian Women* (Sofia, 1983).

94. TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 492, ll. 60–70; TsDA, f. 417, o. 5, a.e. 347, ll. 1–5.

95. TsDA, f. 417, o. 6, a.e. 306, ll. 1–8.

96. *Yearbook of the United Nations*, vol. 39 (New York, 1986), 1418.

97. Krastina Tchomakova, longtime secretary of the CBWM, personal communication, August 2011, Gabarevo, Bulgaria.

## Ongoing Challenges

The biggest problem that all political elites faced in Bulgaria was the arbitrary appointments and dismissals. For example, Elena Lagadinova was supposed to head the Bulgarian delegation to the second World Conference on Women, held in Copenhagen in 1980.<sup>98</sup> Since all Bulgarian citizens needed to obtain special permission to travel to western countries, the list of the names of the Bulgarian delegates to the conference was submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for approval. At the last minute, the minister replaced Lagadinova's name with that of Maria Zakharieva, one of his own deputy ministers, something that could only have been done with the consent of Todor Zhivkov.<sup>99</sup> As the president of the CBWM for the previous twelve years, Lagadinova found herself in the humiliating position of not being able to attend the conference for which she had been actively preparing since 1975. Furthermore, as the participating socialist countries' de facto spokeswoman, political friends and foes alike would certainly notice her absence. "Of course, I told everybody that I was sick and too ill to travel," Lagadinova told me in 2012. "But the truth is that I did not have permission to go. And I could not leave the country without permission."

When Sonia Bakish reached retirement age, in 1980, she resigned as editor-in-chief of *Zhenata dnes*. Immediately, there was an internal struggle over who would replace her. Lagadinova and the magazine's editorial collective had their own internal candidate, but the Central Committee wanted more political control over Bakish's successor. Todor Zhivkov himself also paid a special visit to the editorial offices of *Zhenata dnes* in 1982.<sup>100</sup> Apparently, Zhivkov had always disliked Bakish. He had only tolerated her because of her husband, Stanko Todorov.<sup>101</sup> But by the late 1980s, when Bakish cofounded the National Committee for Environmental Protection of Ruse, which was openly protesting the Bulgarian government's apathy toward environmental pollution from a Romanian chlorine factory across the Danube, retribution was swift. Bakish was expelled from the Communist Party, and her husband lost his seat on the Bulgarian Politburo.<sup>102</sup>

But Zhivkov's days were numbered. One day after the Berlin Wall fell, he was forced into retirement by "reformers" within his own party. About two months later, the CBWM was disbanded, and Lagadinova also retired from public life. Bulgaria's one state women's organization was soon replaced by dozens of nongovernmental organizations, most of them funded by western

98. Iliiana Marcheva, "Maika, truzhenichka, obshtestvenichka: Elena Lagadinova—opit za tipologichen portret," *Izvestiia na Starozagorskiia istoricheski muzei*, vol. 4, *Sbornik of konferentsiia "Lichnostta v istoriata"* (Stara Zagora, 2011), 444–52.

99. International Women's Tribune Center, *Mid-Decade Directory, Europe: Participants at the NGO Mid-Decade Forum and World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14–28, 1980* (New York, 1981), 7–8. Lagadinova believed this was done because Zakharieva wanted the opportunity to travel to Copenhagen.

100. "Sreshta na Drugaria Todor Zhivkov s Redkolegiata na spisanie 'Zhenata dnes,'" *Zhenata dnes*, 1982, no. 3: 1.

101. Maria Dinkova, personal communication, July 2011, Sofia, Bulgaria.

102. Pencho Kobachev, "Zhenata na premiera, koiato izklichokha ot BKP," *24 Chasa*, 22 April 2010, at [www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=457149](http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=457149) (last accessed 13 January 2014).

governments hoping to kick-start “civil society.” These new organizations were independent from the new, democratically elected Bulgarian state, but this did not make them more effective at advocating for women’s interests. Indeed, in the Bulgarian context many of these new women’s NGOs focused primarily on issues that were important to their western donors (domestic violence, sexual harassment, and so on), issues that were not immediately relevant for women now struggling to survive in a newly marketized economy.<sup>103</sup>

The CBWM, although politically constrained, did much to represent women’s interests to Bulgaria’s communist elites. I have shown in this article that from 1968 onward the committee was constantly challenging state policies with regard to women and families, and pressuring the Politburo into expending scarce resources to support women as both workers and mothers. In 1969 it organized the social partners necessary to conduct what was most likely the first sociological survey of Bulgarian women to create detailed time budgets. On the basis of these survey results, the CBWM created a program that protected most women’s reproductive rights and drastically expanded the social infrastructure to support working mothers. They then lobbied for this program to become an official Politburo policy decision. Subsequently, the CBWM used its new powers to make sure that the directors of Bulgarian enterprises in all economic sectors abided by the new decision, and aggressively protected women’s interests if there were compliance violations or failures. The goal of these activities was to support women in both their productive and reproductive roles in order to lessen their economic dependence on men and incorporate them more fully into socialist society, goals which were certainly instrumental in promoting women’s self-actualization, if we broaden the definition of the term to encompass ends other than a liberal conception of individual autonomy.

The CBWM pursued many other policies and activities aimed at supporting women’s self-actualization. The magazine *Zhenata dnes* ran a series of articles discussing issues that might have been considered bourgeois, particularly those on sexology, premarital sex, single motherhood, and Bulgarian masculinity. These were articles that pointed out communist policies’ shortcomings with regard to women and encouraged Bulgarian men to take a more active role in the home. Furthermore, the CBWM’s complaints department received hundreds of letters from women each year, and the committee spent time and resources to answer them and intervene in the cases where they had authority. Elena Lagadinova herself was a tireless letter writer, and the official state archives are filled with missives to the Central Committee and the Politburo complaining about the lack of progress on constructing kindergartens, admonishments about the dearth of cafeterias in factories where women made up the majority of workers, and diatribes about the ugliness of women’s clothing manufactured in Bulgaria.

Finally, despite the fact that the CBWM was a state organization, the records from its national congresses clearly demonstrate that it attempted to be

103. Kristen Ghodsee, “Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism and Women’s Nongovernmental Organizations in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29 no. 3 (Spring 2004): 727–53.



representative of all Bulgarian women. Activists in the committee did not have to be members of the Communist Party, nor did they have to be educated urbanites. The committee had its own source of revenue, which meant that it was not dependent on the state budget for funds to support its programs and activities. The CBWM allowed Bulgarian women to propose their own ideas for activities, and they had the freedom and ability to help organize them. Although the committee was not successful in all of its endeavors (for example, establishing prenuptial agreements or increasing the supply of disposable diapers and feminine hygiene products), it was not for lack of trying. All of these activities were aimed at improving the material conditions of women's lives, which is, I would argue, an essential component of improving their quality of life and supporting their self-actualization.

Despite the CBWM's achievements, and the emerging body of literature that challenges the received stereotypes about state feminism in the former eastern bloc, many contemporary western researchers still deride the accomplishments of the state women's organizations in socialist countries because they were not realized by "massive social movements." For instance, in a 2012 ethnography of life in post-Wall Berlin, anthropologist Damani Partridge explains,

While the East German state related to its female citizens and their bodies in terms of the heterosexist norms of motherhood and marriage, it also enforced an ideology of gender equality. This was not equality based on demands triggered by massive social movements, but planned equality determined by state bureaucrats, and practices introduced and maintained through state-funded social institutions. In addition to guaranteed day care and formal laws that guaranteed equal pay for equal work and equality within the family, there was also the right to abortion without restriction and the right to divorce.<sup>104</sup>

Many western feminists today would drool over the possibility of guaranteed child care, equal pay for equal work, equality in the family, and unrestricted reproductive rights, even if these policies supported the "heterosexist norms of motherhood and marriage." Since there is a rich body of literature showing that state feminism can and has been effective, why is it still necessary to make an analytic distinction between equality "triggered by massive social movements" and equality "determined by state bureaucrats"? If surveys show that the majority of women want the opportunity to be both mothers and workers, is it wrong for a state to fund social institutions that allow women to better combine their family responsibilities with paid employment?

The ongoing fetishization of nonstate actors is rooted in a Cold War bias against state-based solutions to social problems. In the more than a quarter of a century since the collapse of communism in eastern Europe and the rise of nongovernmental organizations, much scholarship has looked at the efficacy of NGOs and their heavy reliance on funds from foreign donors.<sup>105</sup> These NGOs may be independent of their host states, but they are not independent of their

104. Damani J. Partridge, *Hypersexuality and Headscarves: Race, Sex and Citizenship in the New Germany* (Bloomington, 2012), 46.

105. See, for instance, Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottoway, eds., *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion* (Washington, D.C., 2000); Janine R. Wedel,

foreign donors. Grassroots activism that pressures governments and markets to respond to citizen initiatives can be effective, but it is not necessarily more effective than an empowered class of internal bureaucrats charged with promoting women's rights.

In a provocative 2007 essay the Bulgarian historian Krassimira Daskalova asked, "How Should We Name the 'Women-Friendly' Actions of State Socialism?"<sup>106</sup> She argues that if there can be state feminism in Scandinavia and China, then the theoretical model could apply to eastern Europe as well. The problem that Daskalova identified was that there was not enough research on the communist-era organizations. With this article, I have contributed to the study of state socialist women's organizations and provided at least one case study showing that state feminism was a model that worked relatively well in Bulgaria between 1968 and 1989. It may be that the persistent dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up feminist activism is a mere semantic difference that undermines our ability to pursue feminist ends by getting us tangled up in unproductive discussions of the relative merits of different means.

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*Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe* (New York, 2001); and Ghodsee, "Feminism-by-Design."

106. Krassimira Daskalova, "How Should We Name the 'Women-Friendly' Actions of State Socialism?," *Aspasia* 1 (2007): 214–19.